

Indian Jewels in UK



Many Indian jewels in UK's royal treasury traced back to Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The discovery of a colonial-era file from the archives of the India Office has shed light on many precious gems and jewels



The discovery of a colonial-era file from the archives of the India Office, the then-British government department responsible for its rule over the Indian subcontinent, has shed light on many precious gems and jewels that came into the possession of the royal family, including many jewels of King Charles III.

As part of a 'Cost of the crown' series, The Guardian newspaper has been chronicling an investigation into Britain's royal wealth and finances in the lead-up to the Coronation of Charles III on May 6.

In one of the reports this week, it references a "remarkable" 46-page file uncovered from the India Office archives that detail an investigation, apparently commissioned by Queen Mary – the grandmother of the late Queen Elizabeth II, into the imperial origins of her jewels.

Among its references is an emerald-encrusted gold girdle used to decorate the horses in the stables of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab, which now forms part of King Charles' royal collection.

"The report, from 1912, explains how priceless pieces, including Charles's emerald belt, were extracted from India as trophies of conquest and later given to Queen Victoria," The Guardian investigation reveals.

"The items described are now owned by the monarch as property of the British crown," it notes.

Among the discoveries included a journal recording a tour in 1837 of Punjab by the British society diarist Fanny Eden and her brother George, then Britain's governor general of India, who

visited Ranjit Singh – the powerful king who had signed a so-called “treaty of friendship” with the British at the time.

Dazzled by his kingdom's jewels, Eden wrote: “He puts his very finest jewels on his horses, and the splendour of their harness and housings surpasses anything you can imagine.” “If ever we are allowed to plunder this kingdom, I shall go straight to their stables,” Eden wrote.

Later in the 19th century, Ranjit Singh's son and heir, Duleep Singh, was forced to sign Punjab over to the East India Company and according to historical records, the kingdom's stables would have been among the many targets of plunder.

The infamous Koh-i-Noor diamond is said to have come into the possession of Queen Victoria as a result of just such a plunder by East India Company officials.

While modern-day royals averted a diplomatic row by not choosing the traditional Koh-i-Noor encrusted crown for Queen Camilla's Coronation on May 6, the 'Cost of the crown' has cast a spotlight on the wider extent of colonial-era jewels in royal possession today.

Among the jewels identified in the document uncovered by The Guardian is a “short necklace of four very large spinel rubies”, the largest of which is a 325.5-carat spinel that later came to be identified as the Timur ruby.

However, research by the academic Susan Stronge in 1996 concluded it was probably never owned by the Mongol

conqueror and belonged to several kings of Persia and Mughal emperors before Queen Victoria sent it from India.

Another Indian item chronicled is a pearl necklace consisting of 224 large pearls, which is also believed to have come from Ranjit Singh's treasury.

"We have finally entered an era where colonial loot and pillage is being recognised for what it really was, rather than being dressed up as the incidental spoils of some noble 'civilising mission,'" Congress MP and author of 'Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India' Shashi Tharoor told the newspaper.

"As we are seeing increasingly, the return of stolen property is always a good thing. Generations to come will wonder why it took civilised nations so long to do the right thing," he said.

According to the investigative series, Queen Mary's interest in investigating the origins of her jewellery appears to have been prompted by a curiosity about some of her pearls' origin rather than any moral concern about their colonial origins.

A Buckingham Palace spokesperson told the newspaper that slavery and colonialism were matters that King Charles III "takes profoundly seriously". It has also been revealed that the palace is supporting research into the British monarchy's historical links with slavery.

"Historic Royal Palaces is a partner in an independent research project, which began in October last year, that is

exploring, among other issues, the links between the British monarchy and the transatlantic slave trade during the late 17th and 18th centuries," the palace has said.

India archive reveals extent of 'colonial loot' in royal jewellery collection

File from India Office archive details how priceless items were extracted from colony as trophies of conquest

by David Pegg and Manisha Ganguly

Five years ago, Buckingham Palace marked its summer opening with an exhibition celebrating the then Prince Charles's 70th birthday with a display of his favourite pieces from the royal collection, Britain's official trove of items connected to the monarchy. "The prince had a very, very strong hand in the selection," the senior curator said.

Among the sculptures, paintings and other exhibits was a long gold girdle inlaid with 19 large emeralds once used by an Indian maharajah to decorate his horses. It was a curious choice to put into the exhibition in light of the violent means by which it had come into the hands of the royal family.



Emerald girdle of Maharaja Sher Singh, c 1840.
Photograph: Royal Collection Trust

As part of its Cost of the crown series, the Guardian has uncovered a remarkable 46-page file in the archives of the India Office, the government department that was responsible for Britain's rule over the Indian subcontinent. It details an investigation, apparently commissioned by Queen Mary, the grandmother of Elizabeth II, into the imperial origins of her jewels.

The report, from 1912, explains how priceless pieces, including Charles's emerald belt, were extracted from India as trophies of conquest and later given to Queen Victoria. The items described are now owned by the monarch as property of the British crown.



Plundered stones

To fully understand the context behind the jewels, and their place in India's history, it was necessary to visit the archives.

A journal records a tour in 1837 of the Punjab area in north India by the society diarist Fanny Eden and her brother George, the governor general of the British Raj at the time. They visited Ranjit Singh, the maharajah in Lahore, who had signed a "treaty of friendship" with the British six years earlier.

The half-blind Singh wore few if any precious stones, Eden wrote in her journal, but his entourage was positively drowning in them. So plentiful were the maharajah's gems that "he puts his very finest jewels on his horses, and the splendour of their harness and housings surpasses anything you can imagine," she wrote. Eden later confided in her journal: "If ever we are allowed to plunder this kingdom, I shall go straight to their stables."

Twelve years later, Singh's youngest son and heir, Duleep, was forced to sign over the Punjab to the conquering forces of the British East India Company. As part of the conquest, the company did indeed plunder the horses' emeralds, as well as Singh's most precious stone, the legendary Koh-i-noor diamond.



The queen mother's crown sits on top of the coffin
during her funeral in 2002.

Photograph: Dan Chung/The Guardian

Today, the Koh-i-noor sits in the crown of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, on display at the Tower of London, and it has become an emblem of Britain's tortured relationship with its imperial history.

Anita Anand, a journalist and historian who co-wrote a book titled *Koh-i-noor* on the diamond, said it was “a beautiful and cold reminder of British supremacy during the Raj”, the

period between 1858 and 1947 when India was ruled by the crown.

“Its facets reflect the fate of a boy king who was separated from his mother,” Anand said. The stone too was “taken far away from his home, recut and diminished”. Anand said: “That is not how India sees itself today.”

Buckingham Palace is plainly aware of the sensitivities surrounding looted artefacts. After the Indian government let it be known that for Camilla, the Queen Consort, to wear the Koh-i-noor at Charles’s coronation would elicit “painful memories of the colonial past”, the palace announced she would swap it for a less contentious diamond.

But, as was discovered by Queen Mary, the Koh-i-noor was not the only gem taken from Singh’s treasury to have found its way to the British monarchy.

Royal with a pearl necklace

Among the jewels identified in the document found by the Guardian is a “short necklace of four very large spinel rubies”, the largest of which is a 325.5-carat spinel that later came to be identified as the Timur ruby.

Its famous name is erroneous: research by the academic Susan Stronge in 1996 concluded it was probably never owned by Timur, a Mongol conquerer. And it is a spinel, a red stone similar to, but chemically distinct from, a ruby.

Elizabeth II was shown handling it in the 1969 BBC documentary Royal Family, and was clearly acquainted with the myths surrounding it. “The history, of course, is very fascinating. It belonged to so many kings of Persia and Mughal emperors, until Queen Victoria was sent it from India,” she observed.



The Timur ruby necklace, 1853.
Photograph: Royal Collection Trust

The queen was never pictured wearing the item. However, she may have worn another of the Lahore treasures, identified in the India Office report as “a pearl necklace consisting of 224 large pearls”.

In her 1987 study of royal jewellery, Leslie Field described “one of the Queen Mother’s most impressive two-row pearl necklaces ... made from 222 pearls with a clasp of two magnificent rubies surrounded by diamonds that had originally

belonged to the ruler of the Punjab" – almost certainly a reference to the same necklace.



The queen wearing pearls at the Royal Opera House in 2012.

In 2012, Elizabeth II attended a gala festival at the Royal Opera House in London to celebrate her diamond jubilee. Photographs showed her wearing a multi-string pearl necklace with a ruby clasp.

Were these Ranjit Singh's pearls? There was speculation they may have been, though Buckingham Palace was unable to confirm either way.

Queen Mary's interest appears to have been prompted by curiosity about the origin of some of her pearls rather than any moral concern about the manner in which they were obtained. But a Buckingham Palace spokesperson said slavery and colonialism were matters that "his Majesty takes profoundly seriously".

Shashi Tharoor, formerly an undersecretary at the United Nations, and currently an MP in India, said: "We have finally entered an era where colonial loot and pillage is being recognised for what it really was, rather than being dressed up as the incidental spoils of some noble 'civilising mission'.

"As we are seeing increasingly, the return of stolen property is always a good thing. Generations to come will wonder why it took civilised nations so long to do the right thing."